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Alpana Knippling

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Tagi Adams

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Manjit Kaur

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Race, Gender, and Authority in the Classroom: Student and Teacher Perspectives

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General Description

This panel discusses how teachers and students negotiate their racial and gender identities in a dominantly White classroom. It describes an actual course taught at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln - English 215E (Introduction to World Literature by Women) - from the perspective of the teacher and two students who took the course. The teacher is from India; one of the students, an undergraduate women's studies major, is from the Fiji Islands; the other student, a recent graduate of the English master's degree program, is an Indian originally from Malaysia. The non-Western background of all three panelists becomes a useful lens through which to address the question of what it means to be women of color (that is, doubly marginalized individuals) in a dominantly White institution. Ultimately, the panelists offer a new challenge to teachers and students as they redefine what it means to teach and study at a White institution.

Panelist 1

As an Indian woman and a teacher of English, I consider my most challenging job to be establishing authority in the classroom. We are trained as teachers to be willing to forego authority in discussion-format classrooms, to enter into an interactive exchange with students. Yet this past semester's experience of teaching English 215E (Introduction to World Literature By Women) has led me to seriously question my former training. In my paper, I wish to offer a narrative of teaching 215E and along the way, productively redefine questions of authority and learning in the classroom.

Panelist 2

As a female student of color in a dominantly White classroom, I cannot just be an individual and student of literature: I must label myself by gender and by race. I must become a living token in order to avoid being rendered invisible. English 215E finally gave me a chance to read Third World women's writing. This entailed a reversal of roles as students were reading writers whose experiences did not validate middle-class White American values. But the politics that marginalize women and people of color and silence them through Anglocentrism soon became evident in the classroom. Hence, my responses to class members and to the readings had to be structured defensively. Why must my

response be dictated by the values of middle-class White American students?

Panelist 3

As a female student of color in dominantly White classrooms, I feel that I am either rendered invisible or exoticized. In the 215E class I sat in on, some students blatantly ignored my presence while others turned me into a spokesperson of my culture and ethnic group. My experience of teaching at both the university and at a small college produced similar problems. My authority in teaching English as a Second Language to international students at UNL was constantly questioned by other faculty members and by the international students themselves. At the college, I was similarly struggling with the issue of positioning myself within a dominantly White faculty and student body. Why must I be rendered invisible or exoticized? Are there no other positions for me to occupy?

PRESENTERS

Alpana Knippling is an assistant professor of postcolonial literatures in the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research and publications are in the areas of South Asian literature, American ethnic/immigrant literature, women's studies, and critical theory at UNL.

Tagi Adams is an undergraduate women's studies and English major at UNL who is originally from the Fiji Islands. She is interested in Third World women's literature and is an active member of several organizations, including the Women's Studies Association.

Manjit Kaur recently graduated from the master's degree program in English at UNL. She has taught English as a Second Language at UNL and English at Peru State College. She also is a reader for *Prairie Schooner* literary magazine. Her interests include Third World women's literature and creative writing.